

PUBLIC RELATIONS.

Public relations are an aspect of the Department's work to which I have given particular personal attention since assuming office. I have felt strongly impressed with the increasing necessity, with the growth of competition, of having a proper understanding in the minds of the people of what the Department is able and willing to do in the way of service to its clients. A valuable channel has already been established through the medium of the Magazine and the Commercial Branch, both of which have materially assisted in bringing knowledge to the people and in clearing up misunderstandings.

It was inevitable that, with such conditions as arose from the rapid development of competition with the railway, many issues should be clouded by the upsetting of well-established ideas, and more particularly by the dissemination of propaganda of the kind that is almost invariably associated with the introduction of a new competitive factor into an industry. The necessity for some counteracting influence has made the question of public relations a paramount one in connection with the Department's business. We have accordingly taken every opportunity that has been presented to get into personal touch with representative bodies and individuals with a view to obtaining an exchange of ideas regarding the problems confronting the transportation industry in general and the Department in particular.

I desire in this connection to express my great indebtedness to the various Chambers of Commerce, Farmers' Unions, Progress Leagues, importers' associations, commercial travellers' associations, and other bodies who have been good enough to extend to us invitations to be present at their gatherings and speak on railway matters. The receptions which we have received on these occasions have been very gratifying and even where, as must inevitably happen, there has arisen difference of opinion, I am happy to say that the discussions have been carried out in a constructive and friendly spirit and have very much helped in the solution of the problem of equating the transport supply to the demand so far as the railways are concerned. We have had through the medium of contact thus established very many valuable suggestions, which we have not hesitated to follow up, and, when found to fit in to our conditions, to put them into operation and make due acknowledgment to the originators.

I desire to take this opportunity of indicating that I warmly welcome the co-operation of every section of the community in making the railways the power for service that we would all wish them to be. Criticism of a constructive type is always helpful, even though the ideas of the critic may not be agreed with by the railway authorities, as such criticism tends to turn one's thoughts inwards, so to speak, and develop a process of self-examination which is the surest way to understanding shortcomings and paving the way to removing them. I recognize that the fullest measure of usefulness from work on the railways cannot be the result of the efforts of any one individual or even of all those who make up the Department's staff. The efforts of all those must be supplemented by the co-operation of the public both as owners and users of the railways (in both of which capacities they have a definite responsibility), and I feel that with that co-operation the railway staff will be encouraged to that degree of effort in the application of their knowledge and experience as will enable the railways to give the maximum satisfaction to the community that their nature and circumstances permit.

COMMERCE TRAINS AND FARMERS' EXCURSION TRAINS.

A feature of our working that has been particularly developed during the past year has been that of the running of special excursion trains for commercial men and farmers. The Commerce Train, which was arranged under the auspices of the Auckland Chamber of Commerce, was an outstanding success from every point of view. The train covered a wide extent of country, and not only demonstrated the Department's capacity for efficient service and organization, but also enabled a valuable work to be done for the Dominion in bringing the business men of the town into immediate contact with the rural people.

Similarly, in the case of the Farmers' Trains, we have given a valuable service to the rural community, and have enabled them to gain knowledge of their country that would probably not otherwise have been afforded them.

The development of the farmers' excursions took its rise in the first place from the many requests we had from time to time for concessions in the matter of fares to farmers during the slack season in the farming industry. We could not, as a matter of railway economics, justify an issue of excursion tickets to farmers alone as a class. We felt, however, that the matter should not be allowed to rest at that, and it was concluded that, if conditions could be created that would assimilate the farmers' traffic to that of an excursion traffic which has its principal justification in large bodies of people travelling together, it might be possible to do something to meet the demand of the rural community in the matter of the above-mentioned request. To that end the Department has organized farmers' excursions from point to point, and their efforts in this direction have been entirely successful. We have received many expressions of very warm appreciation of our efforts in this direction. The success of the Department's work has not only again demonstrated its capacity for service in a direction that is peculiarly its own, but has also provided a means for the betterment of the Dominion as a whole by affording facilities for the farming community in the various districts to exchange views with one another, to the undoubted enrichment of their knowledge and their capacity to get the best results from their farming operations.

Dependent as this Dominion is for its welfare on its primary products, it will be apparent that the expansion of knowledge among the farmers afforded by means of these excursions must have a value far beyond the comparatively small outlay involved in making the various trips.

I cannot pass from this subject without expressing my appreciation of the co-operation of the local authorities, farmers' unions, and other organizations in the various places visited by the farmers' excursions for the way in which they have risen to the occasion and have helped to make the excursions the undoubted success that they have been.